Seminar Gives Training with ADA Compliance

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Pennsville Twp. – Local county, municipal and school officials packed the Riverview Inn Friday morning to learn more about how to make their policies, procedures and local buildings more compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act.

The ADA Training Seminar was organized by Director of the Salem County Office of the Disabled Debra Behnke and funded through a grant from the Henry H. Kessler Foundation.

This is the first year a seminar like this has been held in Salem County.

"The goal is to educate local municipal leaders, small business owners and school officials...on what it means to be ADA compliant," Behnke said.

The seminar also included an ADA packet with information about compliance for the approximate 100 officials who attended.

Community Health Law Project Attorney Stuart Weiner spoke at the seminar and said ADA regulations require that officials take affirmative steps to allow disabled individuals to overcome barriers.

Weiner has gone to other counties in the state speaking about the ADA acts and said there are many officials in the state who aren't aware of many of the requirements of the act, which was passed by Congress in 1990.

"It's been very much a mixed bag," Weiner said. "Many people are aware of the requirements, but aren't sure how to implement them.

"We hope to provide a good road map for how they can implement these policies," Weiner said.

The ADA covers anyone with mental or physical disabilities that substantially limit their activities, those who have had a history of impairment, such as cancer survivors, and individuals who aren't disabled, but appear to be, according to Weiner.

There are currently 54 million Americans with a disability, according to Northeast ADA Center Representative Shami Carr, another speaker at the event. That represents about 20 percent of the U.S. population.

Weiner said there are five administrative steps local officials can take to achieve ADA compliance.

Those steps are to designate an ADA coordinator, provide public notice of ADA writes through multiple means of communication, adopt an ADA grievance procedure, conduct a self evaluation and develop a transition plan for removing barriers at buildings and facilities.

Weiner also recommended forming compliance teams and involving disabled citizens in the process.

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-3rd Dist., said it's important that officials are aware of the rules and procedures outlined in the ADA and joined other officials in thanking Behnke for organizing the event.

"It starts with education," Burzichelli said.

The county will hold its annual Disbailities Awareness Day in the upcoming months.